

Wayne Is Latest To Attempt Creating a Downtown

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Wayne is trying to reinvent itself from a sprawling suburb to a community with a model downtown.

But what downtown Wayne should look like is a matter of debate -- specifically, whether housing should be part of it.

The township and Passaic County have each received grants, totaling \$240,000, to come up with a plan that would likely be centered around the Wayne Hills Mall area on the Paterson-Hamburg Turnpike.

Wayne is following in the footsteps of several other North Jersey towns that worked to create vibrant centers.

Englewood has been successful drawing upscale development to Palisade Avenue. Emerson has a plan to remake the downtown district on Kinderkamack Road with retail and residential and River Edge has a redevelopment plan that calls for four-story mixed-used buildings.

Wayne, however, is trying to do something that few other towns have tried -- create a downtown in a community without a definable center.

If one were created, it could draw people like Wayne resident Diane Forman-Berg who said she never eats out in her hometown. Instead she goes out for dinner in towns like Ridgewood and Montclair so she can "walk around and look at the shops."

"You don't have that here," she said.

The biggest bone of contention is whether Wayne's new downtown should be a place where people live. A \$220,000 study by the county planning office -- paid for with federal transportation funds -- suggests that it includes housing, an idea opposed by local officials.

Everyone agrees Wayne has the final say over what a town center would look like. But the county study recommends turning a stretch of mostly disconnected strip malls into a neighborhood where people could work, shop, walk around -- and live.

Horseshoe-shaped strip malls would be redeveloped like city blocks, and mixed in with offices, town houses and condos. Berdan Avenue would become the main street of the new downtown.

The concrete barrier on Hamburg Turnpike would be replaced by a landscaped median. Other ideas include bike lanes, pedestrian walkways and bus shelters that would be easy and safe to walk to.

Now, bus stops aren't all clearly marked or accessible by sidewalk, according to the county study.

Wayne officials like the county's recommendations to redesign the turnpike, but they envision a center that would be limited to shops and maybe offices.

"You don't want residential because residential costs you money," Mayor Scott Rumana said, referring to the cost of public services. "We have 55,000 residents. We don't need any more."

Rumana supports tying in existing residential neighborhoods through pedestrian walkways, instead of building housing.

Councilman Chris Vergano said Wayne residents want a community where "commercial and residential are separated by buffers" so they don't have to worry about lighting, traffic and noise.

"When you have shops with people living on top of shops it changes the outlook of the town," he said. "I don't think that is the way we want to go."

The state has also weighed in.

Ben Spinelli, executive director of the Office of Smart Growth, called a town center without housing "just a mall by another name."

He said the investment in Jersey City and Hoboken, and the success of towns like Montclair, Morristown and Chatham, prove that mixed-use downtown communities can work.

"To think that people don't want to live in walking distance to shopping, [that they] want to be tied to their cars, that is a mistake in perception," Spinelli said.

He said there's an opportunity to create a neighborhood not dependent on cars – where residents don't have to get in a car to buy milk.

But during a process that will likely last years, the county will have authority over changes to Hamburg Turnpike and Wayne over creating a downtown. But some officials tend to call the various studies "starting points for discussion."

So why does Wayne even need a downtown center?

"It's responding to what many residents are looking for," Rumana said. "It brings people together in a very nice way that creates a community."

He said it could become a destination where people go to congregate.

At least one property owner is eager to become part of a downtown. Robert Hekemian Jr., whose company is owner of the Preakness Shopping Center next to the Wayne Hills Mall, said he already has plans to redevelop it with a "more downtown feel."

Hekemian said that would include redoing building facades, adding new lighting landscaping and redesigning the parking lot and the entrance -- in general, an inviting place that could have a book store and outdoor cafes. For now, Hekemian said it has been difficult in getting some tenants to buy into the changes.

"We are going to keep trying," he said, "and eventually we think they will come around."

No one knows how long it could take to build a town center. Rumana said it could depend on the economy, available financing and cooperation from private property owners.

Township Planner John Szabo Jr. wants to present a concept plan by the end of the year. The township has received a \$20,000 grant from the New Jersey Office of Smart Growth to begin the planning. Szabo promises an extensive public comment period before any decisions are made.

While different neighborhoods have been considered, officials are leaning toward developing the Wayne Hills Mall area, from Alps Road to Church Lane, a thriving commercial district for decades. A partner in the company that owes the Wayne Hills Mall declined to comment.

In the end, the county has to move forward with plans to transform Hamburg Turnpike for the town center to happen, Rumana said. The project will come to be through the private investment of the property owners, and the public investment of the county, he said.

Passaic County Planner Michael La Place said the county would apply for state and federal funds to cover the costs of redesigning the Hamburg Turnpike. He said he didn't know how much the project would cost because it hasn't reached the engineering or design phases.

No matter how long it may take, it's a project that some residents are looking forward to.

"I think Wayne needs it," said resident Carol Galatioto. "It's a better way for kids to grow up and socialize."